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ABSTRACT

The concept of reality held by individuals and societies can be explored by examining reactions to the censorship of the two-part television show in the "Maude" series that dealt with abortion and vasectomy. The station managements of WMBD in Peoria, Illinois, and of WCIA in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, chose not to broadcast the two "Maude" programs and thus demonstrated two aspects of communicational exchange--the censorship act was each station's declaration of its right to exercise its view of reality, and the act resulted in an increase of status for each station. The altercation which ensued between citizens and the station in Peoria raised the question of the moral right of a station management to censor program material, whereas the Champaign-Urbana controversy centered upon WCIA's legal rights. In both cases, however, status was the real issue in the arguments. Thus, consideration of such censorship cases can give insight into both how a station management's view of reality can dominate mass media and the process by which groups and individuals gain status in communicational exchanges. (CH)

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THE CENSORSHIP OF MAUDE:

A CASE STUDY IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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In November 1972, viewers in Central Illinois turned on their television sets in expectation of seeing an episode of Maude. Instead, they heard an announcement:

After the screening of tonight's episode of Maude, we regret that because of the nature of the content of this show, WMBD-TV will not carry it, or the second part, which is scheduled for next Tuesday evening. It is the feeling of the management of this station that the subjects dealt with in this program, namely abortion and vasectomy, are in poor taste when used as the basic theme of a situation comedy show such as Maude. We recognize these subjects as being very timely and serious matters. It is because these matters are very serious and extremely personal to any parties involved that we feel they are out of place and in bad taste in a comedy format. Again, we regret that Maude will not be seen tonight, but we feel that it is the management's responsibility to those we serve that this decision be made.¹

WMBD's sister station, WCIA in Champaign-Urbana, followed suit. WMBD and WCIA were the only two of 197 CBS affiliates who refused to show the two segments of "Maude's Dilemma."

Television censorship, a term used by many in describing the preceding events, has been studied by a number of other people. Most of the investigation however, have been descriptive or legalistic. Those studying TV censorship generally have not attempted to provide a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon. In this paper, we view the events surrounding the censoring of Maude through the perspective of the social construction of reality. We establish the theoretical perspective, examine the events from that perspective, and discuss the implications of the theoretical framework for the study of mass communication in general.

The Theory of the Social Construction of Reality

The basic theoretical position of this paper draws from symbolic interactionism and constructivism.² We view man as an active agent who gives meaning

and order to his environment. The events which impinge upon man take on form and meaning only through his perception of them. Since each individual is unique in his perceptions, each individual has his own unique reality. But man lives in a society--a society not simply defined by structural properties but also by a shared definition of reality. As societies differ so do their definitions of reality and order. The culture of a society can be defined as the objectification of shared social reality. Culture is more than the products or arti-facts of a society. It is a complex dialectical process involving constant redefinition of reality.

The concept of order is crucial in understanding this perspective. We hold that order is necessary for man to understand and act upon his environment. Burke, in his definition of man, says that man "is goaded by the spirit of hierarchy."³ An individual gives order to reality by placing events and people within categories and establishing relationships between categories. The categories important in this paper include right-wrong, moral-immoral, socially acceptable-socially unacceptable, and high status-low status. Nothing within the events or person demand that it be placed within a particular category. It is man's action that makes events understandable. Berger and Luckmann emphasize man's active role in this process: "Social order exists only as a product of human activity."⁴ Society represents the shared social order through its laws, customs, and institutions. It classifies actions as moral or immoral, acceptable or unacceptable. Similarly, it confers status upon groups while denying status to others.

In pluralistic societies there is seldom one clear-cut, unanimously accepted definition of a situation. The existence of various groups with different perspectives is the essence of a pluralistic society. The alternative

perspectives generally do not present a major problem. However, when the issue under consideration is crucial to the maintenance of society, conflict will ensue. Also, when the groups are confronted with limited resources--for example when time permits only one perspective to be shown--conflict is again likely. We suggest that either of these conditions can lead to censorship--the denying of communication channels to alternative perspectives.

In a complex, technically advanced society the mass media play an important part in the creation and maintenance of social order. Lang and Lang suggest that "...the mass media also structure a larger, nonlocal reality from which it is hard to escape."⁵ Many people have noted the ability of the media, especially television, to "create" an issue or a political candidate simply by convening it on news programs. At this point we do not want to participate in the debate over the ability of TV to directly change attitudes or behavior toward an object. Nor do we wish to take sides in the controversy over whether or not mass media simply "gives the audience what they want." Rather, we hold that the media both reflect and create social reality in an on-going dialectical process. Further, we contend that the mass media serve as legitimators. They give normative dignity to the practical imperatives of the social orders. Producers select certain themes to be shown and they treat those themes in ways that both reflect the established definition of reality and create a slightly new definition. Several examples illustrate this point. Prior to The Odd Couple TV programs did not have divorced individuals as central characters (except in day time soap operas.) Unmarried characters were either "swinging singles" or widowed. Divorce, although it occurred quite frequently in "real life" was not really socially acceptable and TV did not legitimate it. The appearance of The Odd Couple as a regular and successful TV series helped to redefine the place of

divorce within society. This is not to suggest that the "divorced life" is given the same status as stable married life. For example, in Suddenly Single a made-for-TV movie with Hal Holbrook, the recently divorced male lead must choose between living with a young model and marrying a divorcee. In line with established social order, he chooses marriage. The "alternative life style" although given recognition as a possible choice, is rejected in the end.

T.V.'s treatment of homosexuality is another good example of the media's ability to redefine social order. During last season, homosexuality served as a central theme for a number of series episodes. Generally, the topic is treated impersonally in either a clinical (Marcus Welby) or legal (Owen Marshall) sense. The "problem" is discussed in a removed and distant manner. Generally, the central character is presented with a choice and chooses the socially acceptable alternative. Only one show that we know of, That Certain Summer, treated the question in a personal sense. The mere fact that series present the topic of homosexuality recognized the existence of an alternative perspective. To that extent it begins to redefine social order.

As we suggested earlier, in a pluralistic society there is generally a considerable amount of tolerance for differing perspectives. However, when programming time is limited, as it is on television, tolerance begins to decline and the potential for conflict increases. This conflict may involve the government and the producers (The Selling of the Pentagon), the producer and the local affiliate (Maude), or the public and the producer or local affiliate (Maude). The conflict in any case clearly centers on whose definition of reality should be legitimated by the media.⁶ When only one perspective can be presented conflict occurs. It is typical of such cases that the party denied access to the public appeals the case to same societal institution for redress. The censored

group looks to the court or a regulating agency to legitimate its position and confer status upon its members.

Based on the theoretical perspective presented above, we argue that censorship is a symbolic action. Groups involved in a censorship conflict generally do not feel that either seeing or not seeing the program at issue will directly change attitudes or behavior of the audience toward the topic. Rather, they are concerned with the recognition and acceptance of their own definitions of reality. The censoring agent is unwilling to allow the alternative definition to be legitimated by airing on the medium. The public outcry and increased discussion of the issue after censorship would seem to indicate that the censoring agent is not as much concerned with how much the topic is discussed as he is where it is discussed. This concern reinforces the importance of TV as a legitimator. Presumably a month-long debate in local newspapers is less damaging than a one hour TV show.

The victorious group in a censorship conflict not only gains status and respect for its definition of reality, but also for itself as a "holder of accepted values." Similarly, the losers in the battle lose status and prestige in regard to the particular conflict.⁷ We do not extend this status loss to a later time. Clearly, many groups who lose the first battle go on to win the war.

In summary, we suggest that censorship may be viewed as a struggle between groups with alternative definitions of reality. The groups involved contest to determine which group's definition will be carried in the limited time or space available. Status and respect is conferred on both the winning side and its perspective, while the losing side declines in status.

Maude: A Case Study

We view WMBD and WCIA's cancellation of "Maude's Dilemma" as a symbolic and status issue. The groups involved in the controversy following the cancellation were engaged in a symbolic struggle. In this section of the paper we review events preceding the cancellation, describe the rationales for cancellation, and finally discuss controversy.

Both midwest Illinois stations had a close-circuit viewing of the first segment of "Maude's Dilemma" prior to broadcast time.⁸ After viewing the show, program director John Ketterer of WMBD made the decision to cancel the segment. At WCIA the program committee made the decision which was announced by Bill Helms program director. It was later revealed that a "citizens" committee had attended the close-circuit showing.⁹ (WCIA has refused to give a complete list of all citizens present at the showing.) The local stations announced their decision prior to broadcast time.

The reasons for cancelling the show were the same at both local stations. Ketterer's announcement stated that abortion and vasectomy "are in poor taste when used as the basic theme of a situation comedy show such as Maude."¹⁰ Helms announcement from WCIA was very similar. The second rationale given by both stations concerned Illinois law. Helms stated, "Moreover, from a legal viewpoint the two-part program may violate Illinois law regarding abortion."¹¹ Ketterer used the same reason. Both stations generally played down the legal consideration and relied primarily on the "good taste" argument. The legal rationale was essentially dropped after an article appeared in The Daily Illini in which Lawrence Johnson (former Champaign County State's Attorney and members of the WCIA viewing committee) stated that he told WCIA at the time of the viewing that showing the program would not be illegal.¹²

The events which followed the cancellation took on very different forms in the two communities. In Peoria, letters were exchanged for several weeks and then the issue was dropped. In Champaign-Urbana, repercussions from the incident continue. Both the Court and the FCC are now involved in the conflict. Because of the different nature of viewer response in the two cities, each will be analyzed separately.

Peoria

As one might expect, both WMBD and the local Peoria paper, The Journal Star were flooded with a wave of phone calls and letters. A final tally of correspondence made by the station shows a two-to-one margin in favor of the station's action.¹³ The number of calls and letters for each side is not nearly so interesting as their content. Both letters to the editor and an exchange of letters between C. L. Dancey (editor of The Journal Star) and Norman Lear (executive producer of Maude) discuss the symbolic and status issue involved.

Most letters to the editor which protested WMBD's actions centered on two questions. First, they commended Maude for dealing with abortion in a more "realistic" manner. Clearly, for these viewers a portrayal of an issue is "more realistic" if it approaches their own definition of reality. One must examine the phrase "more realistic" or "more authentic" in relationship to the perspective of individual. Yet the viewer's perspective is so implicit and tacit that he may feel there is an "objective" reality standard to which this program can be compared. In essence, we suggest that all the arguments relating to the "realistic treatment of the issue" can be translated to mean "a portrayal close to my own definition of reality." The following excerpt from a letter-to-the editor provides an excellent example of this type of response:

We suppose we should thank WMBD for keeping us morally straight and protecting us from the realities of the world which we long had hoped the media would begin to represent with a greater degree of authenticity.¹⁴

Since "the realities of the world" are socially defined, these viewers ask for a specific representation of reality which agrees with theirs.

The second line of argument in the viewers' letters questioned the "right" of the local stations to cancel part of a network series. Generally, they argue that the network was the appropriate decision-making body and that the local stations had no right to cancel what the network approved. For example, one viewer wrote the following comment:

If the television network censors thought the "Maude" shows were fit to be on the air, I don't think it is an individual station's privilege or right to choose for the people what they can or cannot watch.¹⁵

In the view of this letter-writer and many others like him, the national network had high enough status to decide on the nature of programming while local stations should be denied that right. In terms of the theoretical paradigm we presented, viewers questioned the legitimacy of the local affiliate in attempting to define reality. The status issue becomes clear in this case. Each group (the local station and the producer) felt that it had a right to define reality and present it's definition to the public. Because time was limited, they fought over the hour or prime time available. The party that won the conflict would have its view presented and gain status.

The question of status in terms of who could rightfully make the decision is clearly seen in an exchange between C. L. Dancey, editor of the Journal-Star, and Norman Lear, executive producer of Maude. Because the "debate" illustrates our point so well, we include major sections of the letters.

Dancey began the exchange in an editorial dated November 16, 1972. In

response in viewer denial of the station's right to cancel, he stated:

On sober reflection, we suggest that each station has a very limited number or primetime hours to offer and the function of management that cannot be escaped is to make decisions as to what best to fill them with.¹⁸ (*Italics Dancey's*)

Dancey is not discussing the legal right of the station to decide. The FCC has made it clear that the local station has the responsibility to exercise discretion over programming.¹⁷ What Dancey is attempting to do is legitimate the station's right in the eyes of the public. The editor, in a December 1, 1972 editorial, again defends the stations right to decide and attacks Lear's right to decide. He attacks Lear on several levels. First, he states that Lear is an elitist who wants to make all the decisions:

...the Norman Lears of the entertainment industry regard themselves as the courtiers of the king's palace who speak with authority for the realm--and everybody else is merely a provincial peasant who is not supposed to question their august decisions as to the mores and morals of the realm.¹⁸

In Dancey's view, Lear and his elitists friends desire to be the sole definers of reality and on a matter of principle Dancey objects. Thus, Dancey seeks to reduce Lear's symbolic status.

The editor's second attack on Lear centers on the way in which Lear chooses to define reality. It is an unacceptable definition (does not agree with Dancey) and therefore Lear ought not have the only decision making power:

We have also commented before on the "show biz" source of our social judgments--most glaringly on the joyful way the situation comedies, stand-up comics, and musicians hailed the emerging "drug scent" in 1965--thereby demonstrating how totally unfit they are for these kinds of social judgments.¹⁹

Clearly, Mr. Dancey feels that because "show biz" people have made the wrong decisions in the past (from his point of view), they ought not be allowed to make future decisions. The local station is in the best position to make the decision

On December 11, 1972 Norman Lear Responded to Dancey and the response appeared on the Journal Star's editorial page. In essence, Mr. Lear defended his position by stating that he simply created the program and left it up to the people to decide. He did not see any reason for local stations to interfere. In responding to Lear, Dancey reiterated his comments and attacked Lear for misrepresenting the decision-making that Lear, the producer, does in creating the show. Both men argue effectively for their "right" to define reality on television. Since WMBD did not show Maude, it gained status as a group who rightfully can decide what will be shown. We do not argue that all audience members felt the station had that right, but rather through the station's action it gained symbolic status.

Champaign-Urbana

Events in Champaign-Urbana took a legalistic path. The letters to the editors in Champaign papers were quite similar to those in Peoria. Viewers who objected to the cancellation objected because: 1) the station did not have the right to decide, or 2) they agreed with the outcome of Maude. The letters were only a minor part of the reaction. Prior to WCIA's cancellation of the second half of the program, Stephen Goldberg, acting on behalf of the Champaign chapter of NOW filed suit to prohibit WCIA from cancelling the second segment. Goldberg argued that the station's action "constitutes a denial of plaintiffs' rights . . . to receive information relevant to matters of public concern."²⁰ Citizens in Champaign who objected to the cancellation sought to legitimate their position by taking the matter before the court. If the court ruled in their favor, NOW would gain status in the conflict. However, the Court did not rule in favor of NOW- the question was not felt to be in the jurisdiction of the court. In essence, the judge chose not to intervene and confer status on either

group.

NOW's next step was to file a complaint to the FCC. The complaint will focus not simply on the station's refusal to broadcast Maude but also on the station's "ascertainment of community needs".²¹ Goldberg argues that the viewing panel which previewed Maude did not represent an adequate sampling of the community. The final draft of the appeal has not yet been submitted to the FCC and the final ruling has not been made. The action of NOW can be construed as an attempt to gain symbolic status for their group. The FCC appeal does not seem to reject the station's right to decide on matters in general but rather to reject the particular decision and the way it was made. Alternative perspectives did not seem to be represented on the previous panel. NOW appears to be engaged in a more long-term struggle with WCIA and for more permanent stakes.

The comments and actions of groups in both Peoria and Champaign illustrate the theoretical perspective of the paper. In both instances local stations felt they had the responsibility to define reality indirectly by canceling the show. The definition of reality with which they disagreed was not presented to the public. The conflict which followed the cancellation was essentially a status conflict. The groups were competing to be recognized as the legitimate authority for decision making. WMBD and WCIA, in this instance, retained the power to decide what was in good taste for their viewing publics. While CBS viewers in the rest of the nation watched Maude, the WMBD audience watched the tasteful Let's Make a Deal and WCIA viewers saw a rerun from Death Valley Days.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH IN THE MASS MEDIA

The theoretical position of this paper suggests several new areas of

research in mass communication. Since we are not concerned with immediate "quantifiable" effects of the media on the audience, controlled experimental studies which isolate variables and observe effects are not called for. We do not deny the usefulness of this type of study, but we do feel a need to expand our studies and examine the interaction process.

One area of concern which has not yet been examined fully is the audience's perception of the nature of the media. How do each of the mass mediums differ from one another and what influence does the nature of the medium have on the viewer's expectation. Investigations should go beyond present descriptions of media differences and examine the audience's perception. If viewers perceive TV to be a medium of entertainment, how will this effect their perceptions of specific non-entertainment programming? In the same vein, do viewers perceive the media to be legitimate sources of social comment? How much of our non-local reality is structured by the mass media?

A second series of questions centers on the content of the media. We do not suggest continued content analysis in the traditional sense. Instead, we suggest longitudinal studies on one issue as it develops over time. The issue should be examined in terms of occurrence and treatment. The relationship between groups and events in the "real world" and the treatment of the topic should be examined. The continuing dialectic between the media and the society could be examined in this way.

Finally, we would suggest that the producers, the audience, and the local station personnel should be interviewed extensively. The interviews should attempt to determine the perspective or definition of reality from which these individuals operate. A comparison of perspectives over a period of time seems to be a useful way of examining the process of interaction in the mass media.

ENDNOTES

¹John Ketterer, quoted in "'Maude' Cancellation Fires Controversy," The Journal Star, [Peoria, Illinois], November 19, 1972, p. A1.

²Several sources which discuss these theoretical positions are: Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967); Joseph Gusfield, Symbolic Crusade, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1963); and Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

³Kenneth Burke, "A Definition of Man," Language as Symbolic Action, p. 15.

⁴Berger and Luckmann, p. 52.

⁵Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang, "The Mass Media and Voting," in Eugene Burdick and Arthur J. Brodbeck (eds.), American Voting Behavior, (New York: The Free Press), p. 230.

⁶For an extended discussion of this point see Tomatsu Shibutani, "Reference Groups and Social Control," in Arnold M. Rose (ed.), Human Behavior and Social Processes, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 128-147.

⁷Joseph Gusfield in Symbolic Crusade elaborates on this concept of status issues and examines the American Temperance Movement in light of it.

⁸The Journal Star, Nov. 19, 1972, p. A1; and The Courier, [Champaign-Urbana], Nov. 18, 1972, p. 23.

⁹The Courier, Dec. 18, 1972, p. 3.

¹⁰The Journal Star, Nov. 19, 1972, p. A1.

¹¹The Daily Illini, [Champaign-Urbana], Nov. 17, 1972, p. 5.

¹²The Daily Illini, Dec. 16, 1972, p. 1.

¹³David Nicholas, "We Regret That Maude Will Not Be Seen...", TV Guide, March 3, 1973, p. 8.

¹⁴Letters to the Editor, The Journal Star, Nov. 19, 1972, p. A8.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶The Journal Star, Nov. 16, 1972, p. A6.

¹⁷The Courier, Nov. 28, 1972, p. 3.

¹⁸The Journal Star, Dec. 1, 1972, p. A6.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰The Daily Illini, Nov. 22, 1972, p. 3.

²¹Ibid., Dec. 20, 1972, p. 7.